

INTELLIGENCE BRIEFING

Captagon in 2024: Implications After the Fall of the Syrian Regime





Captagon in 2024: Implications After the Fall of the Syrian Regime

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Contents

Executive Summary	3
Key Findings	3
Policy Recommendations	4
Background: The Captagon Crisis in the Middle East	5
Methodology	6
Findings: 2024 Trends in the Captagon Trade	6
Increase in Seizures	6
Changes Along the Jordanian-Syrian Border	8
Arrests and Raids	9
Regime Cracked Down in Its Last Year	9
Outlook and Policy Responses	11
The Implications of Assad’s Crackdown on Captagon Production	11
Recommendations for Policy Responses	12
Biographies	13
Endnotes	14

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COVER: A rebel fighter walks past a pile of burnt captagon pills at a large drug factory in Damascus. (McGrath / Getty Images)

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Our purpose is to shape U.S. foreign policy based on a deep understanding of regional geopolitics and the value systems of those regions.





Executive Summary

Captagon, a synthetic amphetamine-type stimulant, has become a significant health, security, and political threat across the Middle East, from Syria to the Arabian Peninsula and beyond. For over six years until President Bashar al-Assad's ouster this past December, the Syrian regime played a crucial role in sustaining a sharp rise in the proliferation of captagon in the region. Statistics compiled by the New Lines Captagon Trade Project database show a record number of counter-captagon operations, be it interdictions, lab busts, arrests, or clashes, in 2024. However, while this spike suggests the scale of the captagon trade has never been higher, it obscures a critical reality: In 2024, the actual volume of seized captagon has declined steeply, suggesting a drop in supply.

From data collected by the Captagon Trade Project database, compiled from open sources recording over 1,400 captagon-related incidents across the world from 2016 to the present, this report dispels misconceptions about the trade, illuminating how the Assad regime had tactically adjusted its involvement to bolster its political standing in the region in pursuit of regional rapprochement.

In the wake of the Assad regime's ouster, this report illuminates the regime's last year in power.



The number of captagon shipments seized rose in 2024 (Omar Haj Kadour/AFP via Getty Images)

Key Findings

The overall number of captagon shipments seized increased in 2024 to the highest level ever recorded, creating the impression that captagon supply continues to spiral out of control. However, because the average shipment size has been declining, the total volume of seized captagon decreased considerably.

Captagon-related clashes between smugglers and law enforcement authorities have returned to 2022 levels following a particularly violent 2023.

Arrests continued to increase, reaching record levels in 2024, with declines in Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, and the United Arab Emirates more than offset by spikes in Assad regime-held Syria and Jordan.

During its final year in power, the Assad regime showed signs of curbing captagon trafficking, marked by increased arrests and potential punitive measures on companies suspected of trafficking, but there were no major lab busts conducted by regime forces, aligning with Assad's narrative that Syria is mainly a transit hub.

Reduced industrial-sized maritime seizures suggest the regime may have pressured its affiliates to limit large-scale production and/or shift operations outside of Syria, potentially in exchange for Gulf state support and regional normalization.

The report identifies that the Syrian regime likely restricted the volume of captagon as a political tool to achieve normalization while creating a supply shortage that could have increased pill prices.

Right before its collapse, the regime distanced itself from prominent suppliers such as Amer Khiti and militia leader Raji Falhout, signaling a strategy of selective targeting of visible



traffickers to project the illusion of compliance without dismantling major networks. This strategy ultimately failed to secure normalization or regional assistance from neighbors against the opposition offensive.

There has been some speculation that countries that considered normalization with the regime had underreported their seizures. However, this argument is unsupported by Captagon Trade Project data, which shows a higher number of seizures. The motivation for normalization serving to stifle seizure disclosures was weak, as publicized seizures could have been used to pressure Assad for concessions. It is instead more likely that the flow of captagon was redirected or restricted to the potential counterparts in normalization.

Policy Recommendations

- With the Syrian regime ousted and major captagon facilities busted by the new caretaker government, agencies responsible for border security, law and justice, counternarcotics, and public health should prepare for a regional overspill of captagon production as criminal syndicates seek to fill a supply gap to meet regional demand levels.
- Governments should create inroads for participation with the Syrian caretaker government through a regionally led mechanism focused on amphetamine-type stimulants that convenes regional stakeholders and international organizations to exchange intelligence and best practices to best curb the flow of captagon across the Mediterranean-Gulf zone.
- The U.S. government should take the lead on establishing a formal working group composed of relevant agencies from the Middle East, Europe, and Africa that focuses solely on the captagon trade and/or amphetamine-type stimulants
- Countries currently affected by the captagon trade, as well as those at risk from captagon shipments, storage sites, and production facilities, should register to use the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime's International Project on New Psychoactive Substances, enabling law enforcement to engage in feasible intelligence exchange against drug producers and traffickers.
- As the new caretaker government in Syria seizes more captagon pills, the U.S. government and its partners should offer all seizing countries support with safe storage, elimination, and comprehensive chemical profiling, through laboratory access and training, enabling governments to raise awareness about captagon's evolved formula and identify patterns for future captagon production.
- The new government in Syria and its regional neighbors should begin exploring specific harm reduction, rehabilitation, and recovery programs specifically designed for individuals dependent on amphetamine-type stimulants.



Background: The Captagon Crisis in the Middle East

In recent years, captagon has dominated the illicit drug landscape of the Middle East.¹ Once overshadowed by hashish, a concentrated form of cannabis resin, captagon surged to prominence in the late 2010s as the region's leading illicit stimulant, driving a tidal wave of addiction and criminal enterprise.² Captagon's effects as a stimulant, suppressing hunger, sleep, and trauma, gained appeal across the Middle East's geography and demography, attracting a wide spectrum of users who include university students, taxi and lorry drivers, nightclub goers, fighters, and those who are food and income insecure.³ What was once a niche market transformed into a multibillion-dollar illicit industry,^{4 5} with production and trafficking broadly anchored in Syria and destined for consumption markets in Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.⁶

Captagon's dominance accelerated around 2019 when the Syrian regime began to sponsor the illicit industry, enabling producers to upgrade their methods, sourcing precursor chemicals and manufacturing equipment capable of industrial-scale production. This expansion

made it possible to flood Gulf markets, especially Saudi Arabia, with unprecedented amounts of captagon: Seizures as large as 94.8 million pills were recorded.⁷ As traffickers utilized Mediterranean and Red Sea shipping routes to carry enormous shipments, typically through commercial shipping vessels, Middle Eastern law enforcement faced seizures on a scale they hadn't seen before – production on a scale no nonstate actor was capable of in the Levant. Annual captagon seizures over 2021-2023 ranged between 300 million and 400 million pills.⁸

The regime's sponsorship of the captagon trade elevated Syria as the drug's largest producer, being the last country of consignment of around 60% of all captagon seized between country borders over the past four years.⁹ Previous New Lines reports have shown that captagon production in Syria was highly organized, involving various military and militia groups – including Hezbollah, which is also active in production activities in Lebanon. The annual value of seized captagon, most of which is of Syrian origin, has been estimated at \$5.6 billion between 2020 and 2023. From that value, Syria-based and regime-affiliated actors were estimated to profit up to \$1.8 billion per year, almost twice the revenue generated from all licit Syrian exports in 2023.¹⁰



A Syrian rebel fighter inspects a makeshift lab in the town of al-Dimas northwest of Damascus. (Omar Haj Kadour / AFP via Getty Images)



This crisis has imposed economic and societal consequences. In Syria, where the Assad regime backed this trade, captagon became a critical source of revenue, especially as the economy suffered under war, mismanagement, and international sanctions. This was especially the case for the Syrian regime's security apparatus and patronage network, where funds generated through captagon production and trafficking provided alternative revenue streams for key allies and members of the Assad family, as well as resources for materiel, weaponry, recruiting, and even personnel salaries for the regime's Fourth Armored Division.

For smugglers, the illicit drug is an economic lifeline, as each pill can be worth vastly more than its production cost by the time it reaches its most lucrative and popular market in the Gulf. The Assad regime and its partners capitalized on the trade, using it as a tool for economic survival and for exerting political influence on neighbors. Damascus wielded the captagon trade as leverage in normalization discussions, manufacturing a threat to regional neighbors' border security and a spiraling addiction crisis.

Following the sudden fall of the Assad regime in early December, Syria now finds itself at an important crossroads. As regime-associated captagon laboratories and storage warehouses have been identified across formerly regime held areas in Douma, Latakia, Yafur, and Mazzeh, the new caretaker government in Syria faces a choice of whether to continue industrial-scale production in the face of continued sanctions or reject the remnants of the regime-sponsored captagon trade and forge a new counternarcotics strategy. Thus far, it appears the new government has opted for the latter, guarding and opening captagon facilities up for journalists and publicly renouncing the regime's involvement in the trade. However, Syria's new government and the Middle East at large will encounter challenges in restraining spillover effects not only from the ouster of Assad but also from a series of shifts his regime engaged in over the course of 2024.

Methodology

The New Lines Institute Captagon Trade Project is currently the only initiative comprehensively tracking

the captagon trade. This report relies on the project's open-source database to chronicle over 1,400 counter-captagon operations – seizures, raids, arrests, and clashes – across the Middle East and beyond. The dataset, spanning 2015-2024, draws from Arabic and English news articles, social media, and official sources such as Saudi Arabia's Zakat, Tax, and Customs Authority. The database is updated daily and links to a live, interactive mapping tool.¹¹

While the database offers a detailed view of the captagon trade, it represents a lower-bound snapshot due to the limitations of publicly available data. Many smaller seizures remain unreported in the public domain, and authorities at times omit details like pill quantities or seizure locations. Furthermore, seizures cannot capture the total size of the illicit captagon market, given the consignments that go undetected by law enforcement. However, the dataset provides unmatched granularity, including geolocation and country-of-origin information for each entry. Unlike the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) database, which has seen limited declarations from key countries like Saudi Arabia and Syria over the past few years, the Captagon Trade Project's dataset includes more recent information with superior geographic coverage as well as identifying variables such as mode of smuggling, pill color, and packaging details, in addition to origin, destination, and pill count.

This report's data spans from Jan. 1, 2016, to Dec. 31, 2024. While the data covers the entirety of 2024, the last three weeks of December followed the opposition offensive and the takeover of the caretaker government, so only minor captagon seizures were reported.

To learn more about data collection methods and variable details, readers are encouraged to consult the New Lines study on the Captagon trade.¹²

Findings: 2024 Trends in the Captagon Trade

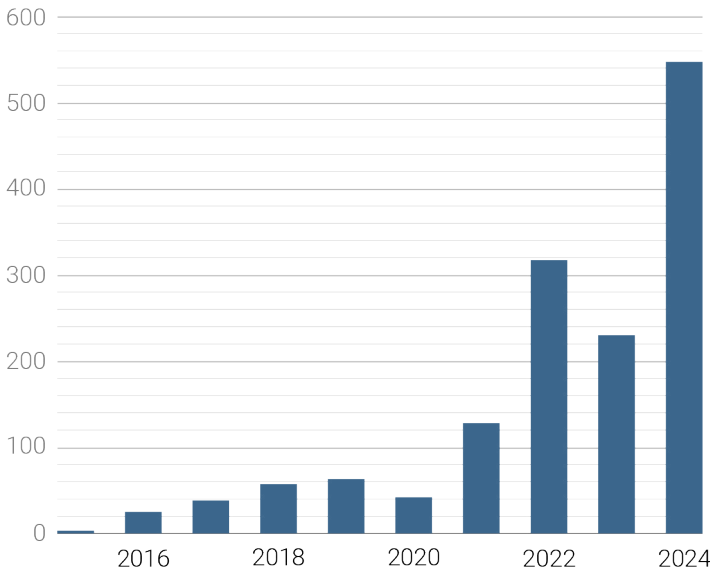
Increase in Seizures

In 2024, the number of captagon seizures reached an all-time high, creating the impression among some analysts and policymakers that the overall supply is on



the rise.¹³ This surge in seizure counts was reflected in consistent media coverage.¹⁴

Number of Captagon Seizures



Source: New Lines Captagon Database (compiled from open source)
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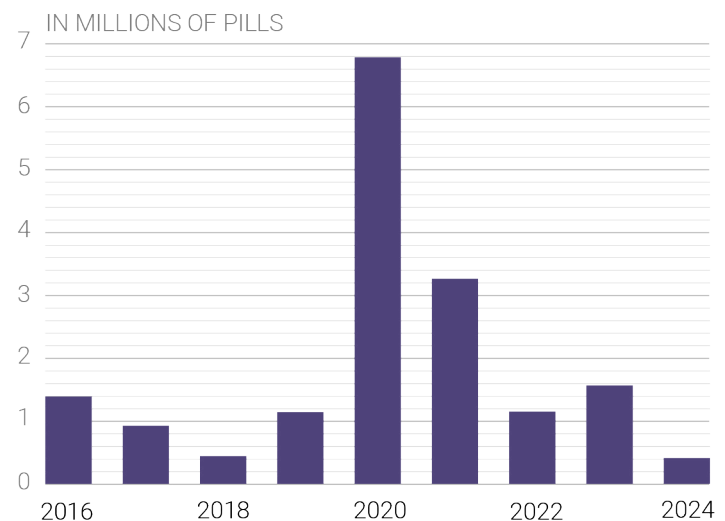
However, despite the increase in frequency, the average size of each shipment decreased, suggesting a serious shift in supply dynamics. The scope of captagon pills available on the illicit market, illustrated by seizure data, still indicates large-scale production and demand in the region, with the volume of pills intercepted still above levels recorded in 2018 and 2019. However, the volume of pills seized experienced its largest-recorded decline, as well as the largest drop in the average size of captagon consignments since 2018, before the trade scaled up to industrial levels.

The rise in seizure frequency, coupled with the drop in average shipment size, resulted in an overall decline in the volume of seized pills. This is the case especially in the UAE and Saudi Arabia – the two largest consumption hubs – suggesting that efforts to curb supply were underway despite existing demand, likely driven by diplomatic considerations surrounding rapprochement with the now-ousted Assad regime.¹⁵

When normalization discussions between the Syrian regime and its regional counterparts were revived after a devastating earthquake struck near the Turkish-Syrian border in February 2023, the captagon trade featured prominently as an agenda

item.¹⁶ For countries like Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE that have heavily felt the captagon trade’s implications, past measures to bolster interdiction efforts and curb captagon supply without directly working through the regime had limited success. Some regional counterparts, particularly Gulf states, saw an opportunity with normalization discussions to capitalize on the regime’s agency over production and trafficking, exploring incentives they could offer Assad that could both reduce captagon supply and induce a change in regime behavior, creating momentum for more challenging normalization agenda items like repatriation and a political resolution under United Nations Resolution 2254. There were even reports of Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia hinting at offering lucrative direct investment packages to the regime in exchange for crackdowns on captagon flows.¹⁷ Talks stalled by late summer 2023, followed by intense regional escalation after Hamas’ Oct. 7 attack on Israel and the subsequent war in Gaza. However, the decline in the volume of seized captagon by late 2023 and throughout 2024 indicates the regime had taken heed of Gulf state requests, calibrating supply levels to enhance its chances for regional normalization.

Average Pills per Seizure

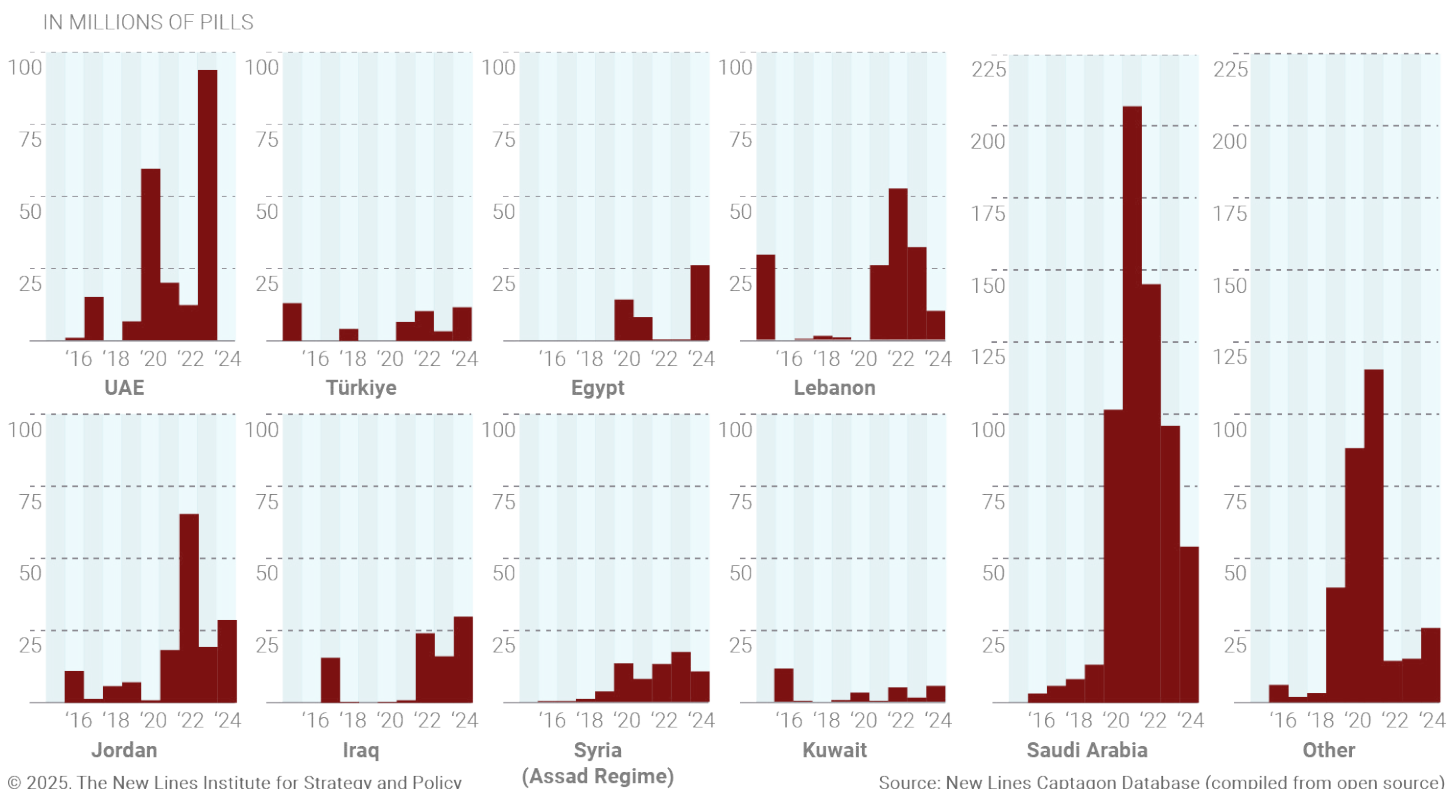


Source: New Lines Captagon Database (compiled from open source)
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While there may have been a political incentive to downplay the captagon trade for a quick track to normalization, there is no verified evidence supporting claims that Gulf states withheld seizure data or cosmetically underreported the size of interdicted



Captagon Seized, by Nation



captagon consignments. This trend aligns with findings from New Lines’ June 2023 report, which noted that traffickers were adapting to enforcement efforts by dispersing industrial-scale operations, shifting to more frequent, smaller shipments to evade detection.¹⁸

In Saudi Arabia, this decline in trafficking likely was further influenced by the government’s decision to reinstate the death penalty for drug trafficking offenses. After a hiatus, Saudi Arabia executed at least 198 individuals in 2024 alone, the highest number in one year since 1990.¹⁹ While the Saudi government officially framed these actions as necessary to maintain public order in line with shariah and reinforce Saudi Arabia’s tough stance against drugs, the shift has raised significant concerns among human rights organizations and the international community, even hampering intelligence exchange that could lead to tipoffs and seizures.

The project also observed a decline in maritime seizures, which had been linked to regime-controlled areas in Syria and ports along its Mediterranean coast,

further contributing to the overall reduction.²⁰ The Captagon Trade Project’s assessment of captagon trade trends in 2023 noted a simultaneous increase in overland smuggling incidents.²¹ The cessation of large-scale maritime operations notably impacted seizure rates in the UAE and Saudi Arabia; while overland smuggling incidents continued, Saudi and Emirati ports such as the Islamic Port of Jeddah and Jebel Ali Port interdicted millions of captagon pills dispatched on commercial shipping vessels at the height of the captagon industry in 2020, 2021, and 2022.

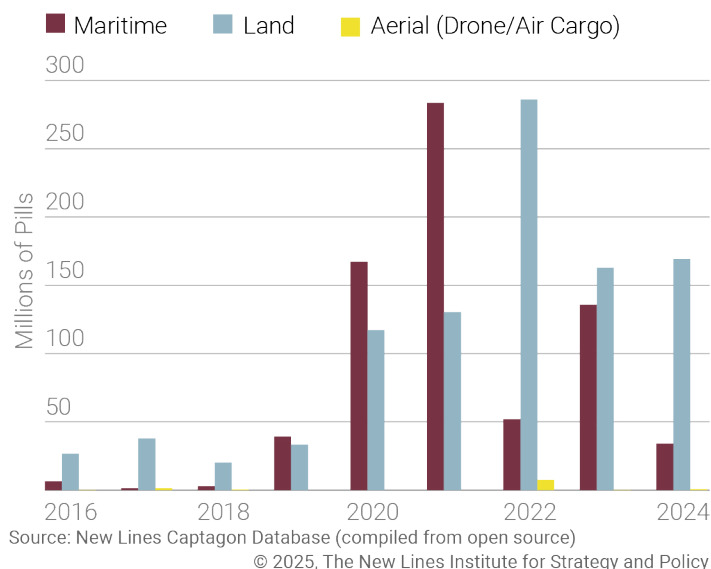
Changes Along the Jordanian-Syrian Border

The dynamics at the Jordanian-Syrian border have undergone significant shifts in recent years, influenced by a combination of increased security measures and broader geopolitical developments. A key development has been the significant investment in both border surveillance technology and border security support infrastructure.^{22 23}

Changes in how Jordanian forces engage with smuggling operations were especially significant.²⁴ In



Mode of Smuggling



particular, the Jordanian military in 2023 conducted targeted strikes against drug smuggling operations in southern Syria, further intensifying efforts to curb trafficking. Airstrikes have also targeted the homes of major drug traffickers in Suwayda governorate, signaling a more aggressive stance against the illicit trade.²⁵ However, the reduced frequency of violent clashes in 2024 emboldened smugglers, contributing to a spike in seizures along the Jordanian-Syrian border.

Notably, clashes spiked along Syria’s border with Türkiye. This is likely due to an increase in overland smuggling into Türkiye as crackdowns on the trade in traditional regime-held production hubs have incentivized traffickers to seek out alternative routes and sites for low-level production, trafficking, and distribution. It is also possible that Jordan’s enhanced border detection, bolstered security presence, and aerial strikes on trafficking syndicates in southern Syria also played a role in redirecting the flow of trafficking – accompanied by violent clashes – to other transit markets farther north.

Arrests and Raids

Arrests in counter-captagon operations across the region reached unprecedented levels in 2024, indicating a regionwide crackdown on implicated criminal syndicates as well as consumers of captagon. Declines in arrests in Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, and the

UAE were more than offset by a surge in operations in regime-held Syria and Jordan. Notably, Syria conducted more raids and arrests in 2024, but with far less armed resistance than experienced in previous years, pointing to a changing relationship between the regime and captagon suppliers. The lack of resistance from traffickers, indicated by reduced armed clashes and violent incidents, may have been a sign of a top-down directive by the Assad regime to reduce the weight of the captagon trade in regime-held areas.

Most of these arrests occurred inside countries rather than across borders, underscoring the domestic nature of these efforts to combat trafficking networks.

Regime Cracked Down in Its Last Year

The Syrian regime had a history of cosmetically altering seizure and arrest data to support a narrative that opposition forces and nonstate actors in Syria, rather than the regime, sponsored the captagon industry and that regime-held areas were only a transit route for the flow of amphetamine-type stimulants.²⁶ To help support this narrative, the regime conducted only occasional interdictions against large-scale trafficking operations, with no



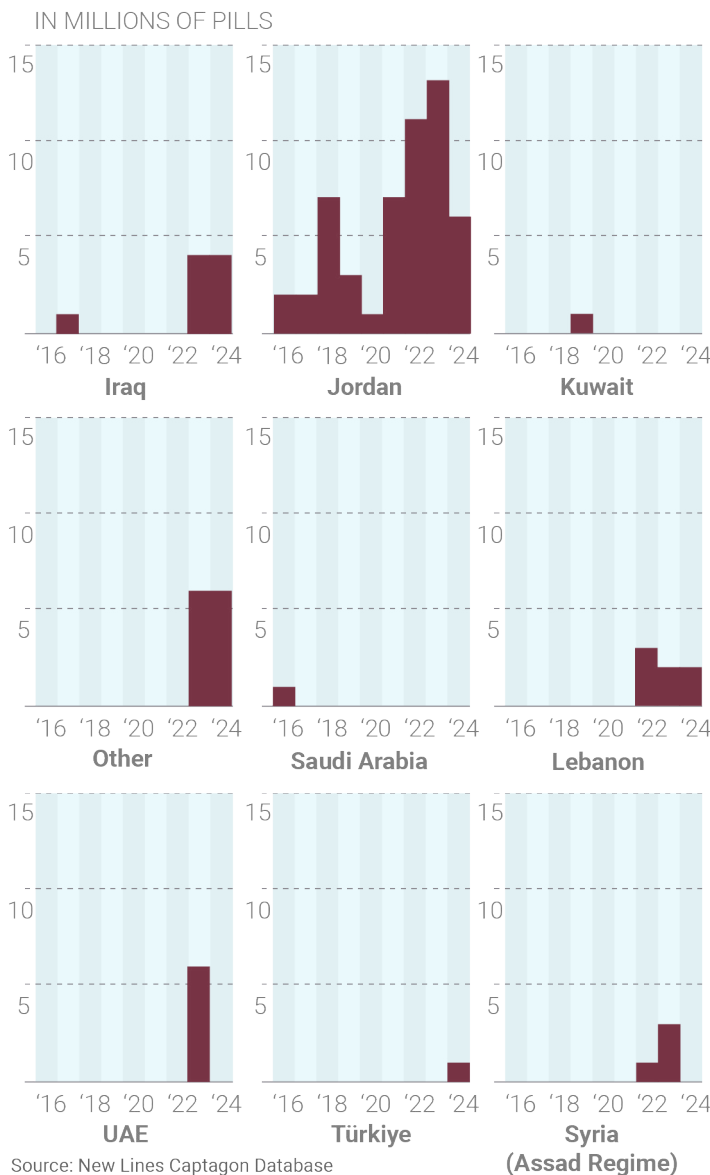


recorded regime-conducted raids on laboratories or pill processing facilities.

However, attempts to bloat arrest and seizure data did little to counteract the reality that captagon was flowing into existing and new markets in the Middle East and Africa at a record pace – a reality that pressured Damascus to change its behavior in the face of normalization discussions.

For 2024, data compiled by the New Lines Institute Captagon Trade Project suggests not only an increase

Violent Captagon-Related Clashes by Country



in narcotics-related arrests in regime-controlled areas but a top-down directive targeting prominent drug trafficking kingpins. High-profile figures in the trade like Raji Falhout reportedly went into hiding, signaling increased pressure from the regime.²⁷

Furthermore, the regime began to sideline individuals such as Amer Khiti, a sanctioned individual from Douma implicated in captagon trafficking and production through his company, Khiti Holding Group. Khiti lost his vice-chairman seat in the Damascus Chamber of Commerce in November 2024 and exited parliamentary elections over the course of this last year, signaling lost political backing from the regime.²⁸ Khiti was implicated in one of the largest laboratory raids conducted in post-Assad Syria in which opposition forces led by Hayat Tahrir al-Shaam (HTS) identified a captagon laboratory in Douma. Khiti had seized the facility, a former potato chip factory called "Captain Korn," and he and his siblings operated it under the directive of Maher al-Assad.²⁹ Electoral campaign materials, such as business cards and pamphlets from Khiti's election campaign, were found scattered on the facility's floor.³⁰

In the regime's last year its Anti-Narcotics Department and Military Intelligence Directorate also began to deploy operational raids against suspected traffickers in key transit hubs, such as in the contested Suwayda governorate – one of the busiest hubs of cross-border trafficking – and arrest key traffickers such as Ahmed Al-Sheikha Al-Mazawda and members of the Al-Hattiti family well-known for smuggling.³¹ Regime raids in Suwayda followed a series of Jordanian aerial strikes against meeting houses, residential compounds, and laboratories over the last year. The Jordanian government had justified the strikes as a necessary measure, accusing Damascus of ignoring actionable intelligence about the names, modus operandi, and locations of trafficking networks offered by Amman on trafficking syndicates operating in Syria's south.³² In the last months of 2024, even anti-regime sources began to acknowledge these actions, particularly regarding narcotics suppliers in Suwayda governorate, which has been a significant hub for captagon production and distribution.³³

While the Syrian regime's security apparatus conducted a notable uptick in seizures and warehouse



raids, and a string of arrests against captagon traffickers, until HTS forces conducted their offensive and toppled the regime, the project’s seizure database did not record a single laboratory or warehouse bust inside Syria. This likely indicates that while there was a top-down directive to restrict the flow of captagon among major traffickers, the regime did not tamper with any of its industrial-scale production sites. It’s possible that the regime sought to achieve a “step-on-a-hose-effect,” temporarily restricting supply to achieve the political objective of normalization and benefiting from increased pill prices, while its production capabilities remained capable of resuming manufacturing at any time.

The number of captagon pills seized remained relatively low and decreased in 2024 compared to 2023. Even before opposition forces seized some of the largest captagon laboratories in the last month of 2024, the volume of captagon circulating on the illicit market had steadily declined. The project attributes this to a possible quiet decline in industrial-scale production, driven by regime-affiliated actors. This assumption is reinforced by a reduction in large-scale maritime seizures, which had typically originated from regime-controlled areas in Latakia; Fourth Division-affiliate smugglers operating out of Lebanese maritime ports; and ports along Syria’s Mediterranean coast. It appears that in his last year in power, Assad tried to walk a fine line between concealing the regime’s involvement in the illicit captagon trade and pressuring his family members and affiliates to scale down industrial-level production, especially operations linked to maritime smuggling routes.

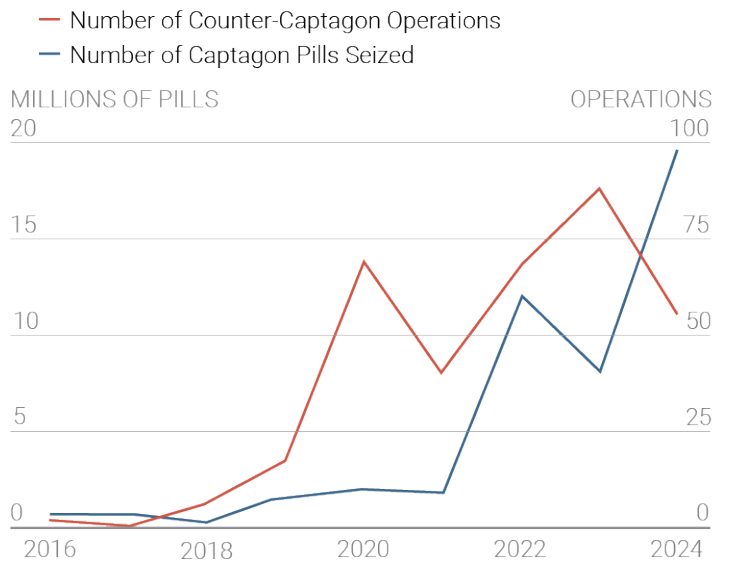
Outlook and Policy Responses

The Implications of Assad’s Crackdown on Captagon Production

While the crackdown by the Assad regime on captagon supply served as a tactical move designed to gain leverage in diplomatic negotiations – a goal that died with the end of the regime – there are several continued implications for Syria and the region at large.

The reduced volume of captagon seized in 2024 indicates that the regime began to adopt a more sophisticated strategy, no longer bloating arrest and

Pills Seized from Counter-Captagon Operations



Source: New Lines Captagon Database (compiled from open source)
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seizure data and temporarily cracking down on major kingpins. The most immediate beneficiary of this crackdown was Assad himself, who likely perceived this as a tool of extortion for economic and political gain: to solidify a transactional deal and potentially full normalization with Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE. By visibly addressing the narcotics trade – a pressing concern for these countries – Assad sought to present himself as a cooperative partner in the normalization process, increasing his chances of securing diplomatic recognition and potential financial support.

However, an unintended consequence of the regime’s suppression of captagon supply in 2024 is that small-scale production began to shift outside Syria. In August 2024, law enforcement in Kuwait conducted its first-ever captagon laboratory seizure, this coming in the north of the country,³⁴ followed by another production site found the following month.³⁵ Iraqi authorities continued to seize more captagon laboratories, with three labs interdicted in both the country’s north and south.^{36 37} And for the first time in years, Turkish police forces conducted raids on captagon laboratories.^{38 39 40} These trends show that restricted supply in Syria encouraged a spillover into new and existing transit countries, as demand for the drug remained stable.



Another unintended implication of the regime's clampdown on supply: a rise of the methamphetamine trade in the region. Lowered supply levels of captagon in 2024 likely set the course for a scramble among suppliers for alternative drugs for users. This trend will likely be exacerbated by the official closure of major captagon production sites in former regime-held areas, such as Damascus, as well as a crackdown on drug trafficking at large in Syria under the caretaker government. An obvious alternative for captagon is another amphetamine-type stimulant, methamphetamine. Methamphetamine consumption – particularly of crystal meth, commonly referred to as “shabo” on the streets – had already been steadily on the rise in the Middle East, particularly in countries such as Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan. Methamphetamine is much more addictive and dangerous for users than captagon. However, its production mirrors that of captagon, requiring much of the same equipment, precursor materials, and synthesis process, making a production shift easy. Furthermore, methamphetamine's smaller size and increased potency makes it easier to smuggle. Traffickers can transport large amounts of methamphetamines on unmanned aerial drones, conceal it within consignments of licit goods like produce or machinery, and hide it on a smuggler's person with smaller chances of detection.

Following the Assad regime's departure and a likely halt to industrial-scale illicit drug production under the new Syrian caretaker government, producers will seek out new areas for production that are resilient to interdiction and closer to destination markets. Given the unlikelihood that criminal actors will be able to acquire the industrial-scale resources necessary to produce captagon at the scale that the regime had, the trade will appear fragmented, with a slew of nonstate criminal syndicates engaging in low-level production to meet demand levels. This will prove challenging for regional law enforcement agencies as they will need to identify new trafficking and manufacturing methods, networks, and routes to disrupt an evolving captagon trade.

Recommendations for Policy Responses

The Assad regime's limited crackdown on captagon in 2024 and its ouster at the end of the year do not

mean that production and trade of the drug will cease. Rather, these developments will set the course for a series of colossal changes that will make it harder for governments, health care practitioners, law enforcement officers, and experts to monitor and address the trade.

The U.S. government and its partners should immediately seek to change its existing counter-captagon strategy, expanding its focus to include other amphetamine-type stimulants such as methamphetamine and new sites for production and trafficking, such as Iraq, Türkiye, Egypt, and Kuwait. Such a strategy should additionally begin monitoring efforts against nonstate terrorist organizations and state-backed militant actors, such as Iran-sponsored proxies, that engage in captagon production and smuggling.

Given the international nature of the captagon threat, a coordinated approach from regional countries and the international community is crucial to counter the trade sustainably. This initiative would bring together regional stakeholders and international organizations to share intelligence, best practices, and strategies, focusing on the Mediterranean-Gulf zone. The U.S. can take a leading role by establishing a formal working group within the Global Coalition Against Synthetic Drugs, targeting amphetamine-type stimulants specifically rather than synthetic drugs as a whole. This focused approach would better monitor and curb production and smuggling tied directly to captagon – a critical priority given the quick evolution of implicated criminal syndicates, its formulaic composition, and modes of distribution.

In addition to high-level coordination, the U.S. and its partners must engage directly with local actors in Syria and seek out inroads to assist in Syria's new chapter of governance. The U.S., its partners, and international organizations like the UNODC should play a role in offering access to laboratory analysis, providing technical expertise on the disassembly of laboratories and disposal of dangerous precursor chemicals and seized drugs, as well as capacity-building opportunities for a long-term counternarcotics strategy in Syria. It is important that governments also seek to help equip this new transitional government in Syria with support and resources, particularly through sectoral sanctions

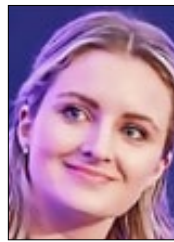


relief, that can encourage Syrians to participate in the formal, licit economy rather than illicit operations like drug production. Furthermore, affected countries and those at risk from captagon trafficking should utilize the UNODC's International Project on New Psychoactive Substances (Project ION). Registering for Project ION would enable more effective intelligence exchange and coordination against drug producers and traffickers.

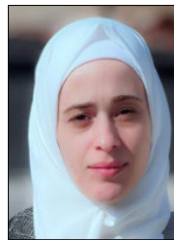
While industrial-scale captagon laboratories have been busted farther north inside Syria, smaller remnants of the trade – such as small-scale production and trafficking – likely remain in the country's south, in cross-border areas like Suwayda and Daraa that have been traditional hubs of smuggling. Border security challenges related to captagon trafficking demand stronger collaboration with the Jordanian Armed Forces, which play a dual role in securing Jordan's borders. As a member of Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR), a coalition led by the Combined Joint Task Force focused on stability in Iraq and Syria, Jordan coordinates regional security efforts while independently targeting smugglers along its borders. Supporting Jordan's forces, Combined Task Force partners in northeast Syria and Iraq, and other regional stakeholders is essential. Equipping these forces for interception, surveillance, and confrontations with traffickers would strengthen a comprehensive containment strategy at key border points. Additionally, the U.S. and allies should consider providing laboratory access for chemical profiling in seized countries to track captagon's chemical evolution and trace consignments back to production sources.



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Caroline Rose is the Director of the Strategic Blind Spots Portfolio at the New Lines Institute, where she leads two special projects: the Project on the Captagon Trade and Project on Post-Withdrawal Security Landscapes. Her commentary and work on defense issues, security challenges, and geopolitical developments has been featured in The Washington Post, CNN, BBC News, Foreign Policy, Politico, Al Jazeera, Voice of America, The Financial Times, The Independent, and other outlets. She tweets at @CarolineRose8.



Roaa Obeid is an Actor Mapping Researcher at Karam Shaar Advisory Limited, specializing in open-source intelligence (OSINT) to map networks and analyze relationships. With over eight years of experience in education, protection, and capacity-building, she brings practical expertise to her research. Certified in psychosocial support and case management, Roaa has worked in accelerated education and as a mathematics teacher. Currently studying Pharmacy and certified as a Mathematical Assistant, she combines analytical rigor with community leadership. Her volunteer work in Northwest Syria underscores her commitment to advocacy and justice for Syria.



Endnotes

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